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HB 6687 "AAC Minor Revisions to the Education Statutes"

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 6687 "AAC Minor Revisions to the Education Statutes" specifically to Section 5 regarding Section 10-212 of the general statutes "increased qualifications for school nurses".

I am in agreement with my colleague Ms. Kosiorowski about the need for increased qualifications for school nurses. School nursing began in response to a public health crisis and the need to provide immunizations to a large number of children during the polio and measles epidemics of the previous century. Today the school nurse still functions as a public health nurse whether hired by a health department or the local board of education. School nurses know that in order for a child to be healthy and ready to learn they must also have access to proper nutrition, exercise, dental care, mental health care and well child care. No longer can the school nurse focus only on what happens with the child during the school day. The school nurse must be able to look at the bigger picture and have the knowledge and resources to address the health issues as they are presented in the school setting. While the school nurse may not be able to find a job for the recently laid off parent, she can help guide and direct the parent to the state Health Insurance Program for children. Although the school nurse may not be able to provide addiction services to the parent of a child, she can work to ensure that the child has a safe home and is cared for by responsible adults. She must have the knowledge and skill to recognize a problem and access community resources to address the problem.

Back in 1982, the last time school nurse qualifications were updated, children with cognitive, physical or mental impairments were often cared for in institutions or cared for at home. Today these children attend their local schools and bring with them their respirators, tracheotomies, feeding tubes, leg braces, catheters and other assistive devices. How we cared for these children 20 or even 5 years ago, is not the same as how we care for them today or how we will care for them next year.

Children with severe speech impairments and sensory issues pose a dilemma to the school nurse when the child presents in the health room with a report of "he/she is not acting like their usual self". It may take weeks or months to teach the child to accept "routine nursing assessment techniques" or "basic first aid" so that the child can accept the same services offered to other children. The school nurse needs to have access to on-going professional development to keep current with best practice.

General education students also face a number of health issues that benefit from the nurse's knowledge of evidence based practice. The treatment of insulin dependent diabetes in children has changed considerably in the 15 years that I have been a school nurse. The treatment of asthma has moved beyond the issue of allowing children to carry their inhalers in school. Nutrition education is more than the food served in the cafeteria. Physical activity is not just gym and recess. The choices children make now will impact their health for the rest of their lives.

The call for better qualifications for school nurses should not be viewed as an unfunded mandate. School systems do not make a wage distinction between the nurse with an associate or bachelors degree. Nor do they recognize higher level degrees such as masters, advanced practice registered nurses or a doctorate. Yet surprisingly, there are a number of nurses with advanced degrees already working in school nursing. The health and safety of our children is the primary concern.

Senator Fleischmann I am a resident of West Hartford, and have worked in early childhood care and education in West Hartford. Your record as a legislator shows your ongoing concern with the health and education of children. Your introduction of HB 6687 indicates your recognition of the essential role of the school nurse in ensuring that all students are healthy and ready to learn. Thank you for your continued efforts on behalf of the children of Connecticut.